Retail Review and Healthcheck

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Overview

In seeking to address the issues faced by the borough in meeting its future needs, we have sought advice regarding the performance of the town centres and advice and ideas as to how they can contribute to the borough's future success.

We undertook a retail healthcheck of the town centre in order to identify how the retail offer is performing, as well as identifying the issues that are preventing performance improvement and growth.

The healthcheck consists of three elements; a survey of retailers and service operators within thetown centre regarding their performance and perceptions of the town centre, a review of the current offer from the perspective of the consumer and a desk review of other relevant data.

Survey of retailers

The main findings of the survey were:

- most customers are working or living locally
- people visit the centre on a regular and frequent basis
- the busiest times of the day are between 11.00am and 3.00pm
- transaction values are low, with most below £10

Whilst retailers are generally satisfied with the performance of their own business, nearly 50% are dissatisfied with the performance of the town centre itself. They cite parking, safety, cleanliness and retail mix as the main areas to focus improvement upon. In terms of retail mix, this included a desire to see a greater number of high street multiples.

The market emerged as a key issue, seen as an asset with potential to improve in itself and as a catalyst for the town centre generally.

However, trading in the town centre is mixed, and there is some pessimism about the future of the centre amongst traders.

Retail Review

At June 2018, there were around 180 units in the centre. Service operators dominate (31%), with comparison shopping (23%) and food and drink (21%) also prominent in the mix. Vacancy is approximately 13%, which is higher than the national average of 9% (Springboard April 2018), though the empty units in Gillingham are in peripheral locations off the pedestrianised High Street, especially Skinner and Canterbury Streets.

The high level of service operators reflect the local needs function of the centre. Whilst previously, 10+ years ago, Gillingham was a destination visit for comparison goods, its current (and future) primary retail function is a local needs centre for frequently bought products, i.e. service, food and minor comparison goods.

A high proportion (39%) of the food and drink units are food takeaways. There is little in the way of quality, healthy or family oriented food and drink provision.The foodstore provision in the town centre is also weak and limited to a Nisa convenience store and Iceland frozen food store.

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Gillingham's town centre extent

The extent of a town centre is often defined in planning terms through the Local Plan.

However, Gillingham town centre does not have a boundary defined in the 2003 Adopted Plan, and this position is being reviewed in the emerging Local Plan. The adopted plan effectively uses the 'retail core' designation as a town centre boundary, and this includes primary and secondary frontages.

The 'retail core' defines the area within which 'core area' uses (i.e. shops and services like banks) would be acceptable. This boundary is broadly and roughly drawn and includes the whole of the High Street from the railway station to Britton Street at the western end, together with Canterbury Street and Skinner Street between Green Street and Jeffery Street.

This boundary excludes some of the study area around the Marlborough Road junction and at the extreme western end of the High Street.